

Jean-François Millet

Painter-Etcher

By

Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer

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from "The Independent"*



To which is appended a sketch of the

Life of Millet

By

Frederick Heppel



New York

Frederick Heppel & Co.



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THE DE VINNE PRESS



The Shepherdess Knitting. (*Etching*)

Millet as an Etcher

By

Mrs. Schuyler Van Bensselaer



THE etchings of Jean-François Millet (counting each state of each plate separately) are forty-four in number. They range from tiny first essays, roughly scratched on copper and printed by the artist himself with color from his palette, to large accomplished etchings, beautifully printed by professional hands. These last show in many cases designs with which some of Millet's most famous paintings have made us familiar. Here in black and white we find again, for instance, the "Gleaners," the "Wool-Carder," the "Peasant with Wheelbarrow," the thrice-popular "Two Peasants Going to Work," and the "Two Men Digging." But, even so, there is no question of "reproductive" art. In etching a subject which he had previously painted Millet did not try to reproduce the painting; he merely tried to give fresh expression, with a different artistic method, to a conception already once ex-

pressed with paint. Each etching stands on its own merit *as an etching*, as frankly and simply as though no painting of the same subject were in existence.

Millet's truly artistic nature shows in the fact that he went thus about his work. And the breadth and versatility of that nature is convincingly proved by the intrinsic excellence of these etchings in conjunction with the intrinsic excellence of the corresponding pictures. A man who had given his whole life to etching only, who had never thought of painting, and had never cared for those effects proper to painting and not to etching, could not have been more truly and markedly a born etcher than Millet showed himself to be—few though were the plates and many though were the canvases he worked upon. To depend upon lines, not tones, for expression ; to make every line “tell,” and to use no more lines than are absolutely needed to tell exactly what he wants to say ; to speak strongly, concisely, and to the point ; to tell us much while saying little ; to suggest rather than to elaborate, but to suggest in such a way that the meaning shall be very clear and individual and impressive—these are the things the true etcher tries to do. And these are the things that Millet did with a more magnificent



Peasants Going to Work. (*Etching*)



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power than any man, perhaps, since Rembrandt. Other modern etchings have more charm than his—none have quite so much feeling. Others show more grace and delicacy of touch—none show more force or certainty, and none a more artistic “economy of means.” Compare one of these prints with the corresponding picture, and you will feel, more deeply than ever before, how much more important was the intellectual than the technical side of Millet’s art. Its technique is always admirable, whatever may be the process chosen ; if it were not, the intellectual message would not be told so clearly. But it is never the sort of technique one cares much about for its own sake ; certainly never the sort that another man, with a different message to deliver, could wisely try to imitate. It is *a means*, in short, and not *an end* ; and a means which gets its interest from its peculiar fitness to help the artist toward his true end, the expression of his thought and feeling. Even the color that is so beautiful in Millet’s best paintings is not, we find, really necessary to express his inmost power. In looking at these etchings we hardly remember the delightful golden tones of the painted “Gleaners,” the misty springtime atmosphere of the “Going to Work,” or the rich and tender scheme of the

“Wool-Carder.” The essence of the painter’s feeling is here, in these few strokes of black on white ; and the essence of his feeling is more valuable than even the splendid glow of color by means of which he enhanced, on canvas, its effect. Had he not been possessed of a deep, genuine, and contagious sort of feeling—possessed of it above all other modern men—so simple a kind of expression as these etchings show, would have had little to attract the observer. But had the expression been simple merely, and not wise as well, had its very simplicity not been the last word of artistic power, intelligence, and subtility, it would never have conveyed so intense and clear a feeling as now it bids us read. Only a great artist could have felt as Millet did ; only a great etcher could have expressed his feeling with the needle as he did.

It is interesting, too, to note, that with all the difference that exists between one of these etchings and the corresponding paintings, there is in each case great similarity also. The difference is in method—the similarity in conception. A born painter has been defined as one whose visions of things imagined are as clear and vivid as his sight of things perceived. We can all imagine scenes and figures, but

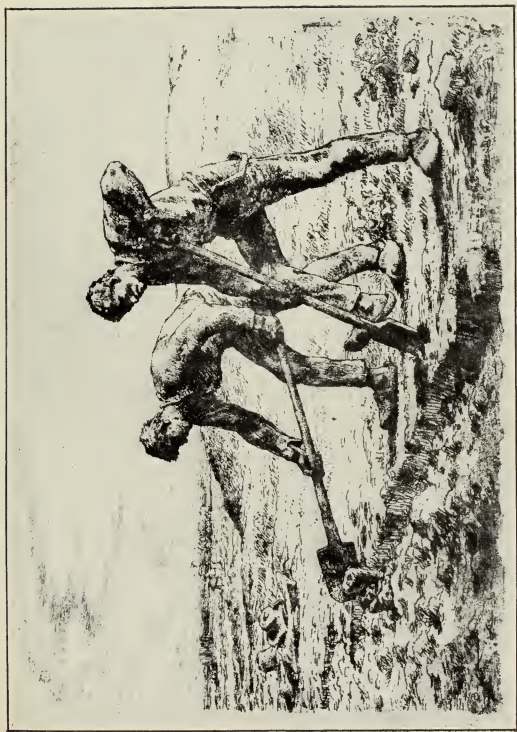


The Woman Carding Wool (*Etching*)

only the born artist can imagine them so distinctly that he is impelled to reproduce them, and is able to reproduce them so exactly that we then see them just as he had seen them—with their spiritual suggestiveness as well as their outward form. Certainly such words are true of Millet's visions. Certainly no artist's conceptions can ever have been clearer, more of the nature of inspirations which come from some undecipherable source and cannot be altered even at the will of the mind that has received them. For even when the method of expression, or, so to say, of translation is changed, the essential characteristics of the conception remain the same. Unlike as are the two figures in execution, the face and attitude and expression and general sentiment of the etched "Wool-Carder," for instance, are almost phenomenally the same as those of the painted "Wool-Carder." The effect of the picture is very different from the effect of the etching; but the meaning, the feeling, the spiritual quality, is exactly the same in the one and in the other.

The woodcuts engraved by Millet himself are but a few bold and crude essays; apparently, he soon gave up the attempt to work in this way. But certain designs which he drew upon

wood were cut by his two brothers, and among these there are some things of marvelous force and beauty. No more striking contrast could be imagined than that which would exist were one of these cuts—say, for instance, the large “Shepherdess”—placed side by side with one of the best of recent American woodcuts. No comparison would more clearly show the vast range of the art—the different kinds of excellence which can be obtained by its apparently simple methods. These Millet cuts are of the school of the sixteenth, not of the nineteenth, century—very simple, very bold, almost rude in execution; done with a few strong black lines relieved on broad fields of plain paper. So simple are they that one is tempted to believe they were done with the old-time knife and not the new-time burin; and so splendidly strong and “telling” that one can hardly believe it was a modern French and not an ancient German hand which drew and cut them. A series of woodcuts engraved from Millet’s drawings by other hands is far less interesting. We feel how intimate must have been the artistic sympathy of his brothers with himself when we see how much of the character of his designs is lost when translated by a stranger’s touch.



Two Men Digging. (*Etching*)

The Life and the Etchings of Jean-François Millet

By
Frederick Heppel



JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET was born in the little village of Gruchy, on the Norman coast, on the 4th of October, 1814. There for generations his family had cultivated their small piece of ground, and there the future artist was brought up in the laborious thrift of the poorer French peasantry.

As his mother could not be spared from her daily labor in the fields, the care of the child fell to the grandmother. Of this devout and excellent woman Millet always cherished the most affectionate remembrance, and to her training he was chiefly indebted for those strong principles of right and morality which he always maintained.

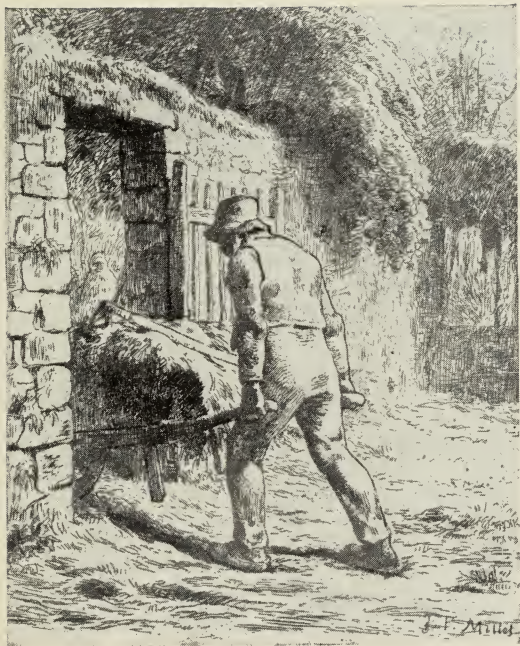
In the intervals of his labor in the fields, the boy received some instruction from the Curé of Gréville. This worthy man encour-

aged him to study Latin, telling him that through it he could become a doctor or a priest. Millet did learn Latin, but declared that he would be neither priest nor doctor, but would help his father on the farm.

The elder Millet appears to have been an enlightened man. From the first he encouraged his son's propensity to make sketches of the scenes and persons about him ; and when, at the age of eighteen, Millet proposed to adopt the career of an artist, the father replied : " My poor François, I cannot well spare you while your brothers are so young ; but we will go together to Cherbourg and show some of your drawings to an artist there, and if he considers that you have real talent, I will consent."

At Cherbourg they showed two drawings to Mouchel, who was a pupil of the school of David. This artist at first refused to believe that the drawings which were shown him could be the unaided work of a peasant-boy ; and when at last convinced that they were, he declared that the boy had in him the making of a great artist.

Millet then commenced his art studies at Cherbourg, and while there he also read with avidity all the books he could procure. Besides the French authors, he was passionately



Peasant with a Wheelbarrow. (*Etching*)

fond of Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Goethe, and Fenimore Cooper. He removed to Paris at the age of twenty-three, and although he was then a simple peasant, he was far from being an ignorant one. His letters show that Millet was a man of intellect and refinement, and in after life it was his habit to read his Bible and his Virgil in the Latin.

The artist has left a record of his first experiences in the great city. His main desire was to visit the pictures in the Louvre, but he was too shy to inquire his way, and wandered about until he came upon the building by chance.

He was chiefly impressed by the works of Mantegna, Michael Angelo, and Nicolas Poussin ; but the artificial prettiness of Watteau and Boucher gave him no pleasure, and he had a feeling that the performing puppets in their pictures should be shut up in a box after their masquerade was over.

He became a pupil of Paul Delaroche, but could never adopt the academic formality of that popular painter.

Although his resources in Paris were very slender, Millet contrived to make several visits to the beloved homestead in Normandy. During one of these visits in 1841, he painted several portraits (some sign-boards also), and among

these portraits that of the young girl of Cherbourg whom he married.

Millet was then a large, strong, handsome young man of twenty-seven. His first wife died within three years, and in 1845 he married the woman who became the mother of his large family, and who remained—until his death, thirty years afterward—his devoted companion in his few joys and many sorrows.

Thus far fortune had, in a moderate way, smiled on the artist, but now his troubles began to come thick and fast; and they only ended with his life. Returning to Paris in 1845, Millet and his wife endured years of dire privation. In the winter of 1848 a friend found them in a room without fire, and learned that for two days they had had nothing to eat. Several pictures were refused admission at the Salon, and those that were admitted found few admirers and few purchasers. It was the oft-repeated tale of so many men of great original genius (those innovators and prophets whose tombs are devoutly built by posterity): first, total neglect; next, encountering opposition and detraction; after that, occasioning violent controversies; still later, seriously considered; and finally taking their place among the immortals. When at last renown came to Millet, it came



The Gleaners. (*Etching*)

too late. The strong, vigorous man was worn out by long years of neglect, poverty, and disappointment; no strength remained to gather the harvest — and so he died.

Surely commonplace mediocrity leads a happier life than inspired genius! And may there not be among us some unknown *Millet*s living and suffering to-day?

Millet never took kindly to Paris. The artificial glare and glitter were repugnant to his simple, serious nature, and he was fain to escape in 1849 to the little village of Barbison, on the skirts of the forest of Fontainebleau. Here he rented the cottage where he lived for twenty-seven years, and where he died on the 20th of January, 1875, in the sixty-first year of his age.

After the master's death his widow and children continued to occupy the now famous little cottage at Barbison, and in 1886 some of his admirers purchased this cottage and made Madame Millet its owner. It was there that she resided to the end of her life.

Millet's development in art was steady and gradual. It was only after he had definitely devoted himself at Barbison to the delineation of peasant life, that his masterpieces in painting and etching were produced.

Although he was wretchedly poor during this period, yet a few of his contemporaries recognized him even then as a great artist. Among those were Théodore Rousseau, Charles Jacque, and the American painter William Hunt.

It is well known that Alfred Sensier filled a rôle, with regard to Millet, not unlike that which was filled by James Boswell a hundred years before with sturdy old Dr. Samuel Johnson. Sensier, as well as Boswell, recognized the greatness of his hero, and sought his society on all occasions; and each has left an admirable biography of the man of his admiration. No one could read Sensier's Life of Millet without being filled with esteem as well as pity for the true-hearted man it portrays.

In etching, as in painting, Millet was thoroughly original and entirely himself. A consummate draughtsman, he despised all tricks of mere prettiness and "finish," and having given the essentials of a composition, he wisely stopped and carried it no farther.

There is little that is distinctively French in his work; no coquetry, no superficial adroitness or vivacity; but in their place are direct and serious honesty combined with transcendent ability. Some extracts from his letters to



A Woman Sewing. (*Etching*)

an intimate friend will show how this poet of the poor saw his vocation: "To paint well and naturally, I think an artist should avoid the theatre." "The human side of art is what touches me most; the gay side never shows itself to me." And of the weary and hopeless toil of the poor, he writes: "To me this is true humanity and great poetry."

Millet's etched work was produced at a time when the art had not as yet become popular, and hence some of his finest plates have become very scarce; indeed, several prints, or states of prints, are unique.

His paintings being so well known, either through the originals themselves or through etchings (done by other hands) and by photographs taken from them, our present concern is with the original etchings which the master executed with his own hand. Of these there exist only twenty-one plates, and they include some eight which are mere studies made by Millet of the etching process, so that his finished etched plates number only thirteen.

Nearly every one of these thirteen etchings is of special interest because it is the original finished study which the master afterwards elaborated into some famous painting. There is a saying among the French artists to the

effect that a man paints every day, no matter how he feels; but that when he etches it is only on his *good* days; and the distinguished American artist Thomas Moran once said, when looking over some etchings by Millet, "I like his etchings even better than his paintings; when he was painting he was mainly thinking of his color, but when he was etching he had nothing to think of but his drawing."

Of Millet's thirteen finished etchings the first place is generally accorded to his plate of the "Woman Carding Wool." We may allow this to be "the chief among equals"; these equals being the "Two Men Digging," the "Women Gleaning," the "Man with a Wheelbarrow," the "Woman Churning," the "Shepherdess Knitting" and the "Peasants Going to Work."

There is perhaps no other great etcher whose works gain or lose so much according to the good or the bad quality of each individual proof. Millet was not himself an expert printer; and judging by the very poor quality of some proofs which were unquestionably printed for himself, he did not always seem to know whether a proof was good, middling or bad. Probably the true explanation is that Millet could seldom afford to pay for the services of an expert



The Man Leaning on his Spade. (*Etching*)

printer, and an incompetent one is likely to ruin the effect of the finest plate in the world ; for a badly printed proof is no better than a libel on the artist. If one man pays five times more for a suit of clothes than another man can pay, the former is very apt to be the better dressed of the two. The dull, heavy and lifeless impressions of Millet's plates which sometimes shock the connoisseur do not exist through any fault in the plates themselves ; for when the plates were printed by such a master craftsman as Auguste Delâtre the result is harmonious, luminous and altogether beautiful. He generally printed Millet's proofs on thin old Japanese paper of a golden tone, or else on fine old Dutch paper. These latter, equally fine, but different in effect, were often printed with a brownish ink. Delâtre was by no means the only expert printer who understood how to get out of Millet's plates all that the master had put into them, and this fact makes it the more astonishing that Millet could have tolerated a considerable number of bad impressions.

It is, then, through fine proofs only that Millet's etchings should be judged. Such seem to have already taken rank among the permanent masterpieces of the art—beginning with the

works of Dürer and Rembrandt and coming down to the etchings of Seymour Haden and Whistler.

Besides his etchings and lithographs, Millet also tried his hand at wood-engraving, and with eminent success. He had the intelligence to see that the laborious and over-elaborate woodcuts of his day were no more than feeble imitations of engravings on copper or steel, and so he brought wood-engraving back to the simplicity which had been so triumphantly practised by Albert Dürer three centuries before. Dürer's engravings on copper still remain models of minute elaboration, but when he made a woodcut he changed his method entirely. The effect in his woodcuts is mainly achieved through the bold and even coarse outlines. Millet has done the same—and with admirable results. He seldom actually engraved the wood blocks upon which he had drawn designs (any more than Dürer did), but, having made some studies in the art, he had his designs engraved by one of his two brothers, Pierre or Jean-Baptiste. The large woodcut of the "Shepherdess Seated," engraved by J.-B. Millet, and the "Digger leaning on his Spade" and the "Woman filling Water Cans," engraved by Pierre Millet, are equally full of the spirit of their great brother.



A Woman Churning. (*Etching*)

Fashions in art will change. Some living artists who have acquired great fame have perhaps already "outlived their immortality," while others, to-day unheralded, will some day be famous. But in the roll of honor of the nineteenth century there is no name more certain to go down to posterity as that of a master in art than the name of Jean-François Millet.

NOTE: *It may interest admirers of the master's etchings to know that, with the consent of the Millet family, all of his etched plates have been destroyed, so as to avoid the possibility of printing any more proofs from them.*



The Shepherdess. (*Woodcut*)

Original Etchings by J.-F. Millet



The following original etchings by J.-F. Millet can (at present) be supplied by Messrs. Frederick Keppel & Co., 20 East 16th Street, New York :

A Woman Hanging out Clothes.

Peasant Resting.

The Man Leaning on his Spade.

The Two Cows.

A Peasant Seated (a very small plate).

Various Sketches on one plate.

The Sea-Weed Gatherers.

A Woman Sewing.

A Woman Churning.

Peasant with a Wheelbarrow.

The Gleaners.

Two Men Digging.

The Watchers.

The Wool-Carder.

The Woman Feeding her Child.

The Shepherdess Knitting.

Peasants Going to Work.

The Spinner.

Engravings on Wood

Peasant Digging.

Engraved by J.-F. Millet.

Sketches.

Engraved by J.-F. Millet.

Woman Filling Water-Cans.

Engraved by Pierre Millet.

The Shepherdess.

Engraved by J.-Baptiste Millet.

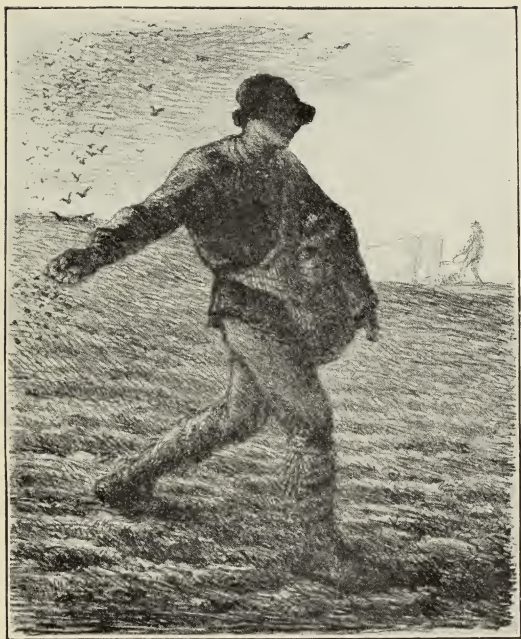
Digger Leaning on his Spade.

Engraved by Pierre Millet.

A Lithograph

The Sower.

By J.-F. Millet.



The Sower. (*Lithograph*)

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